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30th March 1982

Mr. T.Magi,
Secretary,
Senate Standing committee on
Foreign Affairs and Defence,
Parliament House,
Canberra, A.C.T.

Dear Mr. Magi,

I am writing this in the hope that you will find yourself able to accept this brief submission to the Committee's Inquiry into East Timorese matters. Unfortunately I have been unable to write earlier or at greater length because of preparations for leaving for a conference in Tokyo tonight. So, I ask for whatever discretion is at hand!

I write as someone with a considerable professional and personal experience with East Timor and Indonesia. As an undergraduate I studied Bahasa Indonesia and Indonesian history at honours level for three years, and was several times President of the University Indonesian Studies Society. My involvement with East Timor stems from that same interest and affection for the region as a whole. Throughout 1976 I worked with the United Nations delegation of the Democratic Republic of East Timor, both at the United Nations, and in the Congress. I have written considerably on the subject of East Timor and Indonesia. On my return from the United States I was President of the Australia-East Timor Association in 19776 - 77. My professional work in recent years has centred on the problems associated with militarisation in the region, a concern that was first prompted by events in Indonesia and East Timor.

I am attaching a recent publication which deals with this last question in a broader Southeast Asian context. I would ask that it be read as part of my submission on the matter of East Timor., in which I wish to concentrate on the question of the goals of Australian foreign policy in the region as exemplified by our relations with East Timor and Indonesia. For the present I am only able to state a series of brief assertions. I hope it will be possible to address these questions in more detail in oral submission, should the Committee so desire.

1. Australian policy towards East Timor,as in other cases, is declared to be conducted with a pragmatic eye to Australia's interests as a nation, as well as to generally shared standards of international conduct. In the case of East Timor, the effective policy in 1975, which has continued to the present, was that described by the then Ambassador to Indonnesia, Richard Woolcott, as a"pragmatic rather than a principled stand". This he justified at the time because "that is what national interest is all about." That particular decision and his subsequent advice in the last months before Indonesian invasion had the effect of minimising Australian actions in support of Timorese self-determination. A similar attitude has prevailed subsequently with the attitude of "recognising the inevitable".

2. What is really implied in this stance, which typifies our approach to the question, is that the policy pursued is the only one which is realistic in the circumstances. Australian diplomacy has attached great significance to its claims to a "realistic understanding" of the situation in East Timor and in Indonesia.

The issue was never the choice between 'pragmatic' and 'principled' approaches, because all foreign policy is founded on the pursuit of national interest, which will from time to time include some concern for international moral and legal convention. Rather, the theme of realism, of realpolitik was an ideology to justify a particular set of policy choices.

3. I use the term, "the ideology of realpolitik" advisedly, since the basis of sch decisions is in fact a very limited understanding of the guiding forces in Indonesian affairs, or of Australia's interests in the region. The essential assumption behnd such views is that to contradict or be in disagreement with the present Indonesian government is to risk setting in train a series of events that would contribute to instability in the region. Consequently, the question of self-determination and freedom from oppression of near genocidal proportions are held to be matters of idealism, regrettable but a matter of accepting the present.

4. In fact, the I donesian government of today, and the actions of its troops in East Timor are a manifestation of the fundamental instability of the region, which it's very much in Australia's interests to attempt to understand and ameliorate. Far from resting on a solid acceptance by public opinion, the present military government in Indonesia came to power by mass violence, and has continued to use such means to repress alternative conceptions of social and economic development. In fact, Southeast Asia is undergoing a period of considearable instability, which is generally only manifest in non-political ways, since rights of political expression are commonly denied. The invasion of East Timor is such a manifestation.

5. This is quite clear. In no ways could East Timor in itself have constituted a military threat to Indonesia: the mere suggestion is laughable. Rather it presented through the nascent FREILIN Government an alternative path to development which may have recognised the basic needs of its population: such a possibility was and remains deeply inimical to the elites of Jakarta politics.

6. Australian foreign affairs advice has, over the past decade accepted almost without question the view of Indonesia and its problems projected not just from the Indonesian Government, but from those sections of it who were most closely identified with the invasion, and who are the representatives of the militarised elites of whom I speak in my paper. As a consequence the advice reaching the Australian Government has represented a seriously limited set of alternatives, with the effect of lowering Australia's chances of pursuing its goal of regional stabilisation.

7. In conclusionI would simply ask the Committee to consider the implications of this argument, supported by the analysis and evidence of my attached paper, for the future of our relations with East Timor, with Indonesia, and with the region as a whole. The social and economic forces that gave rise to the particular cast of the East Timorese search for self-determination will reappear in East Timor once more, in West Irian, in other parts of Indonesia such as Acheh, in the Philippines. Unless the claims for realism are recognised for the illusions they are, then Australia will once again lose the chance to contribute towards a lo g term stability in the region.

I apologise for the hāste with which this had to be prepared, and I ask the Committees indulgence for tardiness. I should like the opportunity to present an oral adumbration of my submission.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Tanter

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